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"Journalistic text in a new technological environment:
achievements and problems"

THE MEMES` FUNCTION IN THE VISUAL DESIGN OF NEWS
MESSAGES

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Abstract

The article researches Internet memes as a part of the visual presentation of news messages to find their function in the specific communication pattern of social media. To make a conclusion about it authors investigate publications (2018-2019 year) on seven news pages on the most popular social network in Russia - VK. Authors chose these pages because of similarity of their posts structure (a short head or a text with a picture) and variety of their political views. Comparing of different styles of visual design on this pages helps authors to find and show function of meme. Visual meme as a picture, photo or phrase (or their combination) refers to a plot or image which is understandable for a particular social group and can be researched as a special language unit. This language allows to an editorial team of a news page convey their point of view, their attitude to the news, their position quickly, clear and without changing a word in a news message. While the text of the note tends to get maximum of factuality, a meme helps to add to a message an emotion and makes it far from neutral. This creates readable markers for a subscriber for orientation in an information and position plurality of social media.

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1. Introduction

Various discourses today give a specific presentation of an actual cultural situation with variability and dynamism as its central and the most important features. Almost every article devoted to one of the Internet phenomena necessarily mentions this. However, in our opinion, today this position is worthy of critical thinking or its attempts. As well as the idea of the full availability of information for Internet users and oversaturation with information. Agreeing with a quite obvious statement that modern gadgets make the Internet more accessible and mobile, we also want to show how modern communication services and social media help users to manage this information flow and make it much more predictable. Memes are a very specific part of the visual presentation on social networks and can be researched as a part of this process.

Modern mass media cannot be researched completely and honestly without taking a view of a social media influence on it. News pages on social networks in their turn provide new era of journalistic with some specific features of news presentation. Factologism and documentary are very strong trends of modern journalism but they do not explain everything that we see on news pages (Vozovikov, 2018). We suggest that understanding of social media visual instruments (e.g. memes) can give an extended view on all modern mass media.

2. Problem Statement

Meme is a very interesting object for investigation and there are many articles about it, even about their 'symbolic value' and influence on cultural industries or finance (Benaim, 2018). Theoretical research of meme with all possible inter- or multidisciplinary cannot give real conception of it, because, first of all, it is an actively using instrument in modern communication, so its features and functions can change really fast. At list word`s meaning changed a lot for the last 20 years and even much more since the term birth. Here we talk only about visual memes and suppose that it is important to declare this limit. We also suppose that functional memes using for presentation of news messages is not explained in any conceptions of meme. Also, we find that modern view of journalism ideals does not cover using of memes (Amzin, Galustyan, & Gatov, 2016), but it is what we really have in social media, so is worth to be researched.

We want to research a particular sphere of memes using which is quite unusual – news pages on social media sites. Some of them use memes and their specific features, some not. Comparing visual design of several news pages on VK we want to understand what the function of meme as an instrument of communication is and what is the trend of using it. We do not really research a meme in politics and its influence on it, as it was made by Ross and Rivers (2017) after the presidential election 2016 in United States. Our aim is better understanding of a communicative function and potential of meme.

3. Research Questions

Inspiring with real and concrete cases of memes using we steel want to find something new for its theoretical comprehension. So, some of our issues are related to practice side, and some contents an attempt of conception generalization:

- Why do some news pages on social networks use memes and some not?

- What is the function of memes in actual way of mass communication on the example of their using on news pages on a social network?
- Does it give any new position for understanding meme as a communication instrument?

4. Purpose of the Study

With all its popularity theoretically, methodologically, and terminologically, the modern meme's conception remains rather ambiguous and somewhere even contradictory. Recently, the concept of a meme has changed its original meaning and has gained numerous interpretations. Therefore, today it is difficult to talk about its single holistic conceptual paradigm. At the same time, we should note the growing interest in the development and dissemination of memes.

In the article, we try to identify the role and place of the Internet visual meme (as a communication technology affecting the emotional perception of information by the subject) in overcoming and resolving the current anthropological crisis of the modern information society.

Because of our research background and this particular of memes using issue now we have three main hypotheses about this popular Internet phenomena:

- A visual meme does not contain new information it has to be recognizable just to be a meme;
- So, a visual meme is a very important part of modern mass communication language as a marker of “comfort” or “my” position;
- A visual meme is very useful for news pages because it can represent clearly the position of redaction without using emotions in a message text;
- Visual meme helps to make “comfort zone” of opinions and meanings for the user in his news feed.

We suppose that this new way of visual communication works not on developing images and information diversity, but opposite, on making a predictable and stable information environment for each user. This position can be interesting for the understanding of communication processes in social media.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Theoretical basis

Our approach to meme analytics relies on works from various discourses and areas of research. To show the main position of view we should say about the concept of ‘precedent phenomena’ by Russian linguist Karaulov (1987). His idea about texts, stories and plots which can become a separate element of a language is a new founding brick in understanding of meme’s nature as it is. Our view on a process of memes understanding and ‘translation’ in the process of communication we base on the theory of ‘coding-decoding’ by Hall (1980, 1997) and the analytics of representational practices by Berger and Luckmann (1966), Moscovici (2000) and etc.

5.2. Material of research

We find that with this theoretical approach it can be interesting and productively to provide an analysis of memes which are used for the visual design of news messages on news pages with different political orientation. In this case, we decided to analyze the messages of a number of news pages on the

most popular social network in Russia VK: 'Lentach', 'Bumaga', 'RBK', 'Telekanal Dozhd`', 'Novosti RT na russkom', 'Netipichnaya politika'.

Our choice of these pages is due to their popularity, regular updates, and subscribers` activity. In addition, the general design line was also a reason for selection: on all these pages you can find relevant news reports presented in quite a similar form. There necessary is a header and then a picture selected by the editors' team. Because of this criterion, for example, the research does not include the posts from the 'Novosti Pervogo kanala' page, because it uses a lot of videos. At the same time, the indicated pages and communities reflect both the official (or close to it) position of the Russian government and ones that transmit the opposition view of developments. We have monitored these pages throughout the 2018 year and the beginning of the 2019, the article presents several examples of different visual design of messages about the same informational occasion, with the most semantic proximity of the text of the headers.

6. Findings

Driving to the main part of the issue we want to start with an overall view on the visual stylistic of chosen news pages and their transmitted positions. We researched these pages: 'Lentach', 'Bumaga', 'RBK', 'Telekanal Dozhd`', 'Novosti RT na russkom', 'Netipichnaya politika'. Last two of them can be defined as agreed with the position of the official government of Russia, 'RBK' can be called a neutral with focusing on economics and business, other represent an 'alternative' or opposition view.

Not all of these news pages use pictures, immediately identified as memes. And here is the reason to make a clear distinction: pages that broadcast the oppositional position often use a visual meme to transfer their own intonation outside the text ('Lentach'), while in the pro-government meme cluster there is a separate page (e.g. 'Netipichnaya politika'). At first glance, for official groups of pro-government news channels, the meme is generally unacceptable as a communicative instrument, but regularly recurring visual images of such communities (e.g. 'Novosti RT na russkom') show that there is a peculiar meme system there, but it is aimed at expressing completely different feelings. Many photos of the Russian flag and other countries official symbols, images of military equipment, photos of meetings of various government agencies, etc. - create an image of a serious, important and at the same time detached message. So visual design, in this case, adds some formality that legitimizes represented position. That is why all the humor is put on separate pages, in which we can find some emotional positions.

At the same time, on oppositional news pages, we find another pattern of news messages design: reportage photography and quotes decorated in the corporate style and colors ('RBK', 'Telekanal Dozhd`') make a style here. Documentary, neutral view and witnesses` view seem to be the ideal for this cluster of news pages. We can suggest that it is quite important for these communities to show that their presentation of news is valuable just for this: liveliness, relevance, informality, but authenticity. Memes` using is typical for 'Lentach' and 'Bumaga' pages as a semantic component of messages. Trying to be more neutral in the verbal part of a post they use specific visual language to show a position to a text topic.

We think that is also important and interesting, that pages 'RBK', 'Telekanal Dozhd`' and 'Novosti RT na russkom' exist not only on social media mode. All of them have another channel of news translation – TV which is the main, so page on VK is an added option for them to present their interpretation of news and style of 'talking'. So, they are a good example of a convergence journalism which is a new trend on

media business. This phenomenon is quite popular now even as a theme of university courses (Oleshko, 2015).

One fact can be presented completely different on different pages, even with a similar title of news messages (Figure 01). Even with a lack of understanding of the used meme it is not hard to notice the difference between submissions of messages, positions, and self-reproduction of these two communities.

An analysis of the Internet visual meme refers us to the general characteristics attributed to modern information culture. The meme reflects the main feature of the language of actual pattern of communication: in the media space information spreads not directly, but through a complex of references to an already well-known cultural object. Each meme, as well as other units of the media language, are some indicators by which the subject of communication manifests his belonging to various groups and subcultures, builds his own image in a multilayered network of ideas and meanings, representing the essence of the communication medium itself (Pryahina, 2018).

Positions of news pages are read by visual design rather quickly. It is intended to legitimize the message and make it an authoritative one or magnetize a subscriber with strong emotions. However, this legitimization is achieved in different ways: in one case, 'meme of an officialness' is used, in the other - documentary or humor. The last one, off course, is the best resource for memes, as it shown in Heath, Bell, and Stenberg's (2001) article about popularity of 'urban legends' (.).

Today we can say that social media give users a new pattern of news reading. Every user of social networks creates his own news feed, choosing certain news channels and pages, whose positions are quite clearly indicated and expressed through the style of messages, rhetoric, and design. It seems that choosing a TV-channel is close to that, but there are some noticeable differences:

- Customer`s news feed on a social network can combine various positions, so a user can see several different messages with one occasion.
- There no hierarchy of news except its time of publishing. New services of Facebook give a kind of it forcing more popular publications, but it is still optional in VK.
- With a big choice of variants, a user has a new comparison criterion and it is a visual design of each message.

These features make redactors and journalists in social media more thoughtful about visual design and news presentation and it has already become an object of analysis and research (Hudyakov, 2015).

But at the same time, possible variability of represented positions and their strong visual formalization make a news feed in social networks really predictable. To present news in a specific way to make it more interesting for subscribers' pages use a recognizable style of message design, memes that are related with some not written but common in this community position. And this explains how despite the plenty of new informational occasions, a person regularly receives the same messages in his news feed. It creates its own, rather outlined and limited information reality in which the individual exists getting his everyday portion of information. Even if we are talking about the desire to combine different or competing views on one object in the news feed, their regular combination and predictable value judgments make up the user's everyday information flow, 'a personal information environment' - a fundamentally understandable world of recognizable images and positions (Vasilyeva, 2017).

This view of modern mass communication is consistent with the 'culture of attention' concept by Assmann (2016). Then not only instruments of news presentation (memes, words, and style) but also a chosen news occasion can be researched as a way to attract a subscribers attention to a non-verbalised position or sentence. Memes play a significant role in the formation of a personal information environment since they themselves are so-called. case law, the understanding of which is based on recognition. Meme contains a reference to a certain plot or its fragment (event, person, phenomenon), significant for this social group - cluster. Understanding a fundamentally non-verbalizable meme consists of properly decoding its meaning, recognizing the reference.

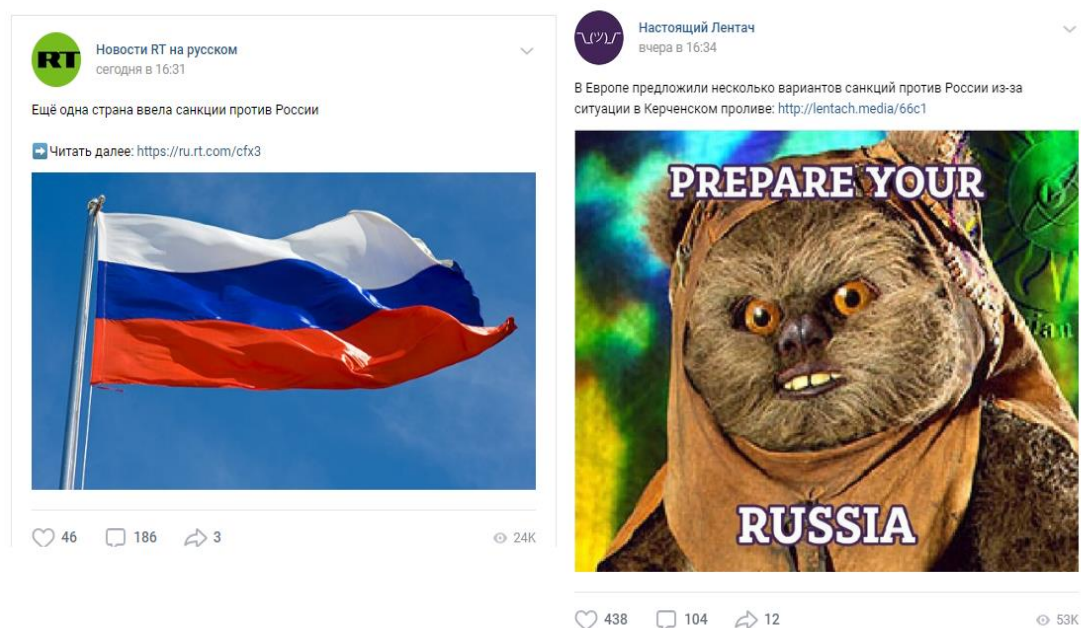


Figure 01. Comparison of two news messages with the same theme

7. Conclusion

Making this research we found several articles with close approach to a similar material. About 5-10 years ago there were published researches about specific style of news presenting on radio (Kunicina, 2012; Shatalina, 2014). The authors were Russian philologists who wanted to compare different styles of news programs to define and describe new instruments in stylistic of hole Russian language. We also want to show that memes are new and popular part of visual communication, but they are not just funny pictures or jokes, they can be very simple and usual picture that refers to complex image. Meme is a new visual language unit, but it is impossible to make a full dictionary of it.

The popularity of memes for the representation of a person, group or cluster position in modern mass media has a very human, emotional bases. First of all, it is a good way to show something non-verbalized fast with economy of resources. It helps to save time for writer and reader with representing a position without its reflection, but with strong feeling of it. This bright, fast recognizable and somehow understandable image gives to a social network`s user an opportunity to get community`s position, to find

it more or less corresponding with his own one. Subjectivism and its ratio in modern (especially on-line) journalism is a popular theme in media studies` discourse (Beynenson, 2015).

It is important not only because it forms a communication process between editors` team and subscriber, but also because it helps user to define his and `alternative` position for choosing pages for subscription. As a result, a social network user gets a set of pages which transmit the same clear positions every day. There are a lot of new occasions every day to make new posts, but this non-verbalized position of community, cluster of subscribers is quite the same. So, there are new occasions, but pretty the same message day after day. In this context, meme using is a communication technology that complements and enriches the trend that is common for modern Internet journalism - the aspiration to facts. In a situation of informational variety and plurality, memes become ideal markers for the identity representation.

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